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ABSTRACT

This study explores the attribution patterns of undergraduate students for females and males who performed parenting tasks traditionally defined as feminine. A total of 136 men and 136 women were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions and were presented with stories of parent-child interactions which varied in terms of the success or failure of the interaction, the sex of the parent, and the sex of the child. The story of the successful parent emphasized nurturant-authoritative qualities described as characteristic of the parents of energetic-friendly preschoolers, while the unsuccessful parent displayed authoritarian-nonsupportive behaviors linked with conflicted-irritable preschoolers. On a seven-point scale, students rated the importance of 22 attribution items for providing an explanatory account of the parent's performance. Factor analysis and analysis of variance were used to reduce success/failure attributions to more basic components and to identify relationships among resulting factor scores. Several main effects for Sex of Respondent and Sex of Parent were found. Males cited external attributions, such as faults of the child, in accounting for parental failure. Females assigned Intrinsic Qualities, such as parent's ability, effort, love and education, as explanations for parental success. Mothers, but not fathers, were perceived to be influenced by family relationships. (Author/RH)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF PARENTING PERFORMANCE

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Bernard Weiner and his associates (1972a, 1972b) have developed a method for analyzing causal attributions in achievement situations along an internal/external dimension and a fixed/variable dimension which has been used to document differences between the sexes in what is perceived to determine their performance. There is evidence that male success is more likely to be attributed to the internal-fixed factor of ability than female success is by both actors and observers. Female failure, on the other hand, is more likely to be linked to lack of ability than is male failure; the latter is more likely to be attributed to deficits in the variable and/or external factors usually invoked to explain female success--effort and luck (Nicholls, 1975; Feather & Simon, 1975; Etaugh & Brown, 1975).

In this judgment process, it is generally assumed that a performance by an actor which is consistent with the expectations for that actor will be attributed to a fixed cause, and a performance inconsistent with expectations will be attributed to a variable cause (Deaux, 1976). Therefore, success by a male on a "masculine" task and by a female on a "feminine" task would be especially likely to be attributed to ability, while success on a cross-sex task would be more likely to be attributed to a variable cause. However, those who have been interested in the attributions made on sex-appropriate tasks (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Feldman-Summers & Kiesler, 1974) have not found that a female's success on a "feminine" task is more likely to be attributed to skill than a male's performance in the same situation. This may be because the intellectual and occupational accomplishments evaluated by observers in these studies have still leaned towards achievement situations with an overall "masculine" flavor. What is lacking in the literature is research on the attribution patterns for females and males performing tasks that have an indisputably "feminine" flavor.

In their 1975 book entitled Women and Achievement, Mednick, Tangri, and Hoffman began by pointing out that this is one of the lacunae in present research: "Domestic activities, including mothering, can represent achievement areas.... Our neglect of this area reflects the dearth of research on it in the past decade" (p. xi). In a similar vein, Frieze (1975) speculated: "Attributional patterns for women performing more traditional feminine tasks have not been assessed but they may well be more similar to the 'masculine achiever' pattern of being more internal for success, especially if these traditional tasks represent achievement tasks to many women" (p. 165).

Parenting was the activity chosen for scrutiny in this study because Mednick and her associates mentioned it as an obvious area. Veroff and Field (1970) found that being a successful parent is considered to be an accomplishment for both sexes. While the role is important to both sexes, it is one in which women are traditionally expected to succeed more than men. For many women, motherhood is almost the exclusive avenue for feminine creativity and achievement (McBride, 1973). Yet taking care of and understanding children have been seen as requiring the same intellectual ability as the knowledge required to appreciate literature, music, and art or that necessary to hold a job (Scanzoni, 1975, p. 56). Parenting is an activity with salience for both sexes which calls for skills comparable to those demanded by other achievement sitautions, but it is also one in which expectations for female performance are higher.

Procedures

One hundred thirty-six female and 136 male undergraduates were randomly assigned one of eight summaries of parent-child interactions, 4 successful and 4 unsuccessful, which were further varied in terms of the sex of the parent and

the sex of the four-year-old. (Seventeen subjects fell into each cell.) They then rated how important they considered each 22 items to be in accounting for the parent's performance on a seven-point scale. The portrait of the successful parent emphasized the nurturant-authoritative qualities described by Baumrind (1967) as being characteristic of the parents of energetic-friendly preschoolers, while the unsuccessful parent displayed the authoritarian-nonsupportive behaviors she linked with conflicted-irritable preschoolers. That the stories constructed to portray success or failure did do just that was demonstrated in pretesting. On a nine-point scale, pilot-study subjects awarded the successful parent an average rating of 8.33, while the unsuccessful parent received a rating of 2.09. Since Frieze (1976) noted that Weiner's four standard causal attributions only accounted for 50% of the open-ended responses proffered to explain success/failure, pilot work was also done to generate the 22 items used to explain parenting performance.

Factor analysis was used to reduce the success/failure attributions to their more basic components. Exact factor scores were then calculated for all of those factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0 using a formula (Kim, 1975, p. 489) which includes a weighted term for each variable in the factor. This method provides estimates of each factor that are then orthogonal to each other. Analysis of variance was performed on each of the resulting factor scores.

Results

When the 22 attributions explaining success were anlayzed, five factors together accounted for 56.9% of the original variance. The first factor was named Specific Situation; observer bias, luck that day, parental effort that day, the child's effort that day, observer influence, and the fact that it was a weekend all loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated

Intrinsic Qualities because ability, generally putting effort into the relationship, having good instincts, educational preparation, and loving the child loaded especially highly on this factor. The third factor was called Luck With Children; generally having luck relating to children, having an easy child and the fact that children are easy to handle were the attributions that were most prominent in the composition of this factor. The fourth factor was named State of Well-Being because it was shaped most by the attributions of feeling physically well, being in a good mood, being relaxed about other things, and having a good personality, and the fact that it was a weekend. Finally, the fifth factor was designated Good Family Relations because the attributions that loaded most highly on it were that the child loves the parent, that the parent has a helpful spouse, and that the parent had a happy childhood.

Female respondents made more use of Intrinsic Qualities than did the males in explaining success--$F(1,128)=5.53, p<.02$. Both sexes used Good Family Relations more in explaining a mother's successful performance--$F(1,128)=5.583, p<.02$.

When the 22 attributions explaining failure were analyzed, seven factors together accounted for 59.1% of the original variance. The first factor was named Child's Fault; having a difficult child, the child not loving the parent, children generally being difficult, and the child not making an effort that day all loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated Intrinsic Qualities because lack of ability, generally not putting effort into the relationship, generally having bad luck with children, having bad instincts, and a poor personality loaded especially highly on this factor. The third factor was called Contingent Factors; being in a bad mood, having an unhelpful spouse, the pressure of other things, and the fact that it was a weekend were most prominent in the composition of this factor. The fourth factor was named Poor Family Relations because it was shaped most by the attributions of the child not loving

the parent, the parent having an unhelpful spouse, the parent not loving the child, and the parent having had an unhappy childhood. The fifth factor was designated Disqualifying Factors because poor health, little experience, inadequate educational preparation, and an unhappy childhood were the most prominent attributions. General bad luck and bad luck that day loaded especially highly on the sixth factor, so it was designated Bad Luck. The two attributions that involved observer bias loaded especially highly on the seventh factor, so it was named Observer Influence.

Both sexes used Poor Family Relations more to explain the unsuccessful performance of the mother--$F(1,128)=6.982, p=.009$. Female respondents explained failure less in terms of Intrinsic Qualities than their male counterparts did--$F(1,128-3.79, p=.054$. Male respondents explained parental failure more in terms of Child's Fault than the females did--$F(1,128)=0.163, p=.003$. Finally, there was an interaction effect in the use of Observer Influence; females used it more to explain the failure of mother-son interactions than they did father-son interactions--$F(1,128)=5.742, p=.018$.

Conclusions

While there were no main effects for Sex of Child in this study, there were several involving the Sex of the Respondent and the Sex of the Parent. The emphasis on Child's Fault as an explanation for parental failure by the male undergraduates is in keeping with other findings that males are particularly inclined to use external attributions in explaining failure (Rosenfield & Stephan, 1978). As opposed to the male respondents, the ratings of the females emphasized Intrinsic Qualities as an explanation for parental success, but demonstrated a hesitancy to call into question the Intrinsic Qualities of the parent who is

unsuccessful. Like Intrinsic Qualities, Family Relations factored out as an explanation for both success and failure. In each situation, however, it was the mother rather than the father who was perceived to be circumscribed by family relationships.

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